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ABSTRACT

This study examined teachers' experiences in the Washington state-mandated educational reform process, their pedagogical responses to the reform initiatives, and the way in which these were mediated by professional development activities such as those initiated by the Goals 2000 project. Five Washington teachers participated in this case study. All teachers had taught in districts identified by a Goals 2000 grant for study and had participated in a year-long professional development series on literacy education. During the 1997-98 school year, researchers conducted systematic observations of the teachers; conducted four interviews with the teachers; interviewed classroom aides and school administrators; collected samples of classroom lessons and student assessment devices; collected student reading scores; collected teachers' concept maps of teaching; and wrote case summary reviews. Results indicated that all five teachers supported the essence of reform; the state education reforms impacted teachers' practice, but practice lagged behind knowledge of awareness; all five teachers worried about the assessment/accountability component of the reform; four teachers were resistant to top-down reform to some degree; and all five teachers valued a learner-centered professional development process. (Contains 18 references.) (SM)

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A School-University Partnership's Involvement in State Mandated Reform: The Impact of a Teacher-Based Professional Development Model on Teachers

Or

"Caught in the Headlights!"

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A School University Partnership's Involvement in State Mandated Reform: The Impact of a Teacher-Based Professional Development Model on Teachers or, "Caught in the Headlights!"

The waves of education reform that brought House Bill 1209, the Education Reform Act of 1993, to the state of Washington began nationally in 1983 with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. *A Nation at Risk* galvanized state legislatures and governors who eagerly examined the remedies proposed by that report and launched an extraordinary number of blue ribbon commissions and panels to study education in their states and propose actions. State legislatures were flooded with bills patterned after the report's recommendations to raise educational standards and stem "the rising tide of mediocrity." In many states these strategies were implemented in the form of mandates for accountability.

A shift in emphasis from *inputs* (what teachers teach; curriculum materials, etc.) to *results* (or performance based learning outcomes) is the most dramatic shift in the ideological underpinnings of educational reform. It is argued that by setting explicit standards, policy mechanisms like curriculum frameworks, instructional materials, testing, and staff development can be keyed to the standards, thus fashioning coherence out of the fragmentation that plagued previous educational reform.

Washington State was an early leader in state-directed alternative models of decision making where the state set the goals and expectations and the local education agency determined how best to achieve those goals. The Education Reform Act of 1993 established four learning goals that called for students to:

I. Read with comprehension, write with skill, and communicate effectively and responsibly in a variety of ways and settings.

II. Know and apply core concepts and principles of mathematics; social, physical and life sciences; civics and history; geography; arts; and health and fitness.

III. Think analytically, logically, and creatively, and to integrate experience and knowledge to form reasoned judgments and solve problems; and

IV. Understand the importance of work and how performance, effort, and decisions directly affect career and educational opportunities.

In March 1995, the Washington Commission on Student Learning operationalized the learning goals by adopting Essential Academic Learning Requirements in reading, writing, communication and mathematics. The Essential Academic Learning Requirements, nicknamed EALRs, were developed by Subject Advisory Committees comprised of teachers, parents, students, business people, and community representatives. In April 1996, the Commission adopted the new standards in science, social studies, the arts, and health and fitness. All eight subjects were again reviewed and updated in February of 1997. By 2000, when the entire legislation is to be fully implemented, high school seniors will be required to pass a proficiency test to graduate from high school and the entire system will be focused on proficiencies and outcomes rather than "seat" time. A critical piece of the reform was embodied in the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), which imposed new high stakes performance assessments to directly measure the learning outcomes of students at the fourth, seventh, and tenth grades. These assessments are specifically constructed for the State of Washington and are tailored to assess student performance in relation to the EALRs.

Washington reforms have been implemented in unique context-specific ways, but as mentioned earlier, they reflect the national phenomenon of educational reform. Much of the reform emphasis has been on higher standards and accountability for schools, students, teachers, and other professionals. Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1998) recognize the importance that improvements in the practice of teachers has to the national reform agenda. They assert that it will require teachers to rethink their practice, construct new classroom roles and expectations about student outcomes, and to teach in ways they have never taught before. They claim that teacher development from preservice to inservice must focus on

involving teachers as learners. This study focuses on teacher professional development of teachers in responding to the state standards and the assessment of student performance.

The literature on the importance of teacher professional development in the context of school reform is growing. Current literature suggests that significant improvement in student learning in public schools will require a systematic restructuring of these schools, wherein educators reconceptualize the school organization, the roles of the individuals involved, the outcomes to be obtained, and the practices they use to accomplish their goals (Elmore & Associates, 1990; Murphy & Hallinger, 1993). Many proponents view the adoption of new curriculum content, instructional practices, and assessment approaches as critical elements of the required reform.

A number of themes regarding desired innovations in these areas can be found in the literature (Cohen, McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; Fuhrman, 1993; Newmann, 1991; Porter, Kirst, Osthoff, Smithson, & Schneider, 1993; Smith & O'Day, 1991). Fred Newman and Gary Wehlage (1995) in particular have identified the importance of teacher professional development. In a report for the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools (CORS) they synthesized five years of research from more than 1500 elementary, middle and high schools throughout the United States and conducted field research in 44 schools in 16 states. They present evidence that structural reforms can work but only when human and social resources are organized to provide particular forms of support for schools and students. They conclude that the recent education reform movement gives too much attention to changes in school organization that do not directly address the quality of student learning and that student learning can meet high standards only if students receive three kinds of support: (1) teachers who practice authentic pedagogy; (2) schools that build organizational capacity by strengthening professional community; and (3) external agencies and parents that support schools to achieve the high quality student learning we have described.

According to two of the best known students of the current school reform movement, Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) the calls for school reform, while adding some welcome attention to education, have left few educators better off. Even those educators who are genuinely interested in reform have a feeling of overload, isolation, fragmentation and increasing despair. They express their concern as follows:

> Educational reform has failed time and time again. We believe that this is because reform has either ignored teachers or oversimplified what teaching is about. And teachers themselves have not yet taken the initiative to build the new conditions necessary for reversing a trend that has overburdened schools with problems, and ironically added insult to injury by overloading them with fragmented, unworkable solutions. Teachers have been too busy responding to the latest forays to steer a bold and imaginative course of their own. (p. xiii)

They advocate the investment of professional development resources not to workshops and inservices, but to opportunities *for teachers to learn from, observe and network with each other* (p.103).

Goldenberg and Gallimore (1991) assert that staff development must be grounded in the mundane but very real details of teachers' daily work lives and in a form that provides the intellectual stimulation of a graduate seminar. By intellectual stimulation, they mean engagement with the substantive knowledge to be taught and the sustained analysis of teaching as a professional pursuit (p. 69).

Our research interest focused on teachers' experiences of the reform process, their pedagogical responses to the reform initiatives, and the way in which those were mediated by professional development activities such as those initiated by the Goals 2000 project.

Methods

Participants

Five case study participants were selected for this study. Criteria for selection included: (1) each teacher taught in a school district which had been identified by a GOALS

2000 grant as a district for study; (2) each teacher had participated in all four sessions of the "Year of the Reader" workshops presented by ESD 112, Washington State University Vancouver, and SW Washington's Literacy Leadership Team during February, March, April and May of 1995; and (3) the widest possible variation in demographics was desired. The sample consisted of five teachers (four females and one male) whose teaching experience ranged from two to twenty years. Three held Master's degrees, and one was in the process of obtaining a Master's degree. One teacher taught at an isolated rural school, two taught at a rural school contiguous to a suburban area, and two taught at a school located in a suburban area. Three teachers sat on committees involved in planning ways to locally implement reforms and/or ways to align curriculum to the Washington State Essential Academic Learning Requirements, while two of the participants had no involvement in planning or curriculum alignment.

Procedure

Data Collection

Data collection took place from November-May of the 1997-98 school year. The data set consisted of multiple sources (Merriam, 1988):

- A series of systematic observations of the case-study participants by a research assistant. Each observation lasted for over an hour, and extensive field notes were recorded. Each participant was given a copy of the field notes along with an evaluation form on which they were asked to respond to and verify the accuracy of the observations. "This dialogue between the researcher and those studied provides the researcher with an opportunity to learn...and the validity check that comes from this dialogue can be of great value" (Erickson, 1986).

- A series of four hour-long interviews distributed over the months of the study were conducted with each participant by a research assistant. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

• In some cases, classroom aides and school administrators were informally interviewed without audiotaping. Field notes of these interviews were written by the research assistant.

• Examples of classroom lessons were collected.

• Examples of student assessment devices were collected.

• In one case, students reading scores from the STAR computer program were collected.

• In one case, a model classroom lesson provided for MIT interns (Grisham & Brink, 1998) was videotaped, as was the subsequent debriefing session.

• Each teacher constructed a diagram to map his or her concept of the teaching profession.

• Researchers wrote case summary reviews halfway through the data collection period and these provided the research team with (1) emerging themes, (2) a direction for further interview questions, and (3) a lens for additional observations.

Data Analysis

Data was triangulated by the collection of multiple sources of data and multiple methods to confirm the emergent findings (Merriam, 1998). Data analysis occurred during a series of four intensive two-day sessions. Before each data analysis session, interview transcripts, field notes and documents were independently scrutinized for themes and recurring patterns of meaning by members of the research team. The first three sessions occurred while data collection was still in progress utilizing a constant-comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which informed subsequent data collection, allowed for tentative findings to be probed further, and subsequently substantiated or revised (Erickson, 1986; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

During the first two-day analysis session, researchers continually moved back and forth between descriptions of what had occurred and their analysis of those descriptions (Merriam, 1988). Initial observations were discussed and statements of relationships

among the data were noted. Data were coded according to a matrix that was developed to help focus the analysis on three general areas: a) Context variables, or "What is going on around the classroom?"; b) Process variables or "What are the teachers actually doing as evidenced by classroom practices, political relationships, and professional development?"; and c) Outcome variables or "How the participants had changed as a result of the reform movement." Using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) combined with analytic induction, categories were constructed to capture recurring patterns that cut across a preponderance of the evidence. Data were compressed, integrated, and written into interim case summaries which included descriptive narrative and direct quotes (Erickson, 1986; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Merriam, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

During the second two-day analysis session assertions and arguments were put forth and analyzed through deliberate and systematic critical reflection by the research team. Excerpts from the data were cited which substantiated or disconfirmed the assertion or argument. This process was undertaken in an attempt to discover what Erickson (1986) calls "concrete universals" which are arrived at by:

> studying a specific case in great detail and then comparing it with other cases studied in equally great detail...The task of the analyst is to uncover the different layers of universality and particularity that are confronted in the specific case at hand...Thus, the primary concern of interpretive research is particularizability rather than generalizability...Each instance of a classroom is seen as its own unique system which nonetheless displays universal properties of teaching...The paradox is that to achieve valid discovery of universals one must stay very close to concrete cases (Erickson, 1986, p. X).

Each senior member of the research team was assigned an individual case record to review and analyze. During the third two-day session, the interpretation of each *within-case* analysis was reported in depth. Each researcher presented his or her case to the team, with attendant assertions and evidence to support the assertions. The team then carefully analyzed the case study to confirm, disconfirm, or extend the findings.

The final two-day data session consisted of cross-case analysis in which researchers sought to synthesize interpretations and build abstractions across cases (Merriam, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The aim was to "see processes and outcomes across [the] many cases, to understand how they are qualified by local conditions, and thus to develop more sophisticated descriptions and more powerful explanations" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 172).

Case Studies

Tom: Joining Up

This is Tom's second year of teaching fourth grade in a small rural elementary school. He clearly loves what he is doing, and talks often and enthusiastically about how he's learning. Tom has 17 students in his class--only four of whom scored below grade level in reading. He talks about his "philosophy" of teaching in terms emphasizing his efforts to make lessons interesting and meaningful for students. Despite the fact that this district reports one of the lowest per student expenditure rates in the state, Tom characterizes his building as one in which fiscal resources are not an obstacle to implementing reform. He describes his work situation as one in which he receives lots of support.

Constructing Practice in the Context of School Reform:

Tom comments often on the value of the EALRS and other reform standards as guidance for someone who is trying to figure out what to teach: "I think it's good (the curriculum standards) because it's telling us what needs to be done...it's a guideline". He describes himself and his colleagues doing what he refers to as "aligning" the curriculum with the EALRs:

> *Our staff is...going through this workbook and we're trying to align our curriculum with the EALRS. So I was forced to look at each Essential Learning and see 'do I teach this, and how?"*

The "alignment" process as described by Tom seems often to serve as affirmation of the value of what teachers are teaching, but does not necessarily lead to curriculum change:

> *I can look at what I'm doing and see how they fit in. But as far as reading them and then setting up my curriculum now to meet specific goals, I haven't gotten to that point yet.*
>
> *I haven't changed what I'm doing...but I'm thinking about it (the EALRS). I'm thinking about 'oh, this addresses that Essential Learning', as I teach a lesson. So, I'm making connections*

In contrast, our data suggest that Tom's daily practice has been more directly affected by the testing policies adopted as part of the reform movement. He described a number of activities he has added to his curriculum to better prepare his students for the 4th grade tests:

> *"I've added practice tests. I've added those kinds of lessons. They aren't taking over my curriculum, but we're doing those sorts of things also. I was talking to the other 4th grade teachers, and we're all pretty much doing the same thing. I'm making those sample tests part of my curriculum".*

On two of the three observations conducted in his class, Tom was actively engaged in teaching his students how to respond to test items taken from the OSPI "Tool Kit" of sample items from the 4th grade assessments. The following vignette is drawn from one of these observations:

(Tom explained to me that it was reading time, and that they were working on learning to take the Example Test for the Grade Four assessment. Yesterday he read the story "Bartholomew" (see attached materials) *to the students and they took the sample test. Then, Tom walked them through the test and the answers and showed them what would need to be done to get a "4" for each answer. Today, he planned to have them take the test again, this time for a grade.)*

> *Tom asks the class to name some things they must do to get "4" on the test:*
> *Jacob: "Put in a lot of details"*
> *Tom" "Instead of saying `the dog died', you might say `Her puppy, Buttercup, died'".*
> *Jessica: "Complete sentences".*
> *Tom: "Yes" (gives several examples).*
> *Holly: "If you use someone's name you must say what it is".*
> *Tom: "Yes, be specific so I know who you are talking about. Buttercup is the dog, Sheena is the girl, Bartholomew is the cat."*
> *Tom: "What can you do if you forget someone's name?" (no response). "You can you can look at another test question and maybe the name will be there".*

Tom reads the story again. The children are quiet and listening attentively. When he is done reading, he passes out copies of the test, saying: "I'm passing these out face down. Don't turn them over until I tell you to. You'll have twenty minutes to finish".

Tom reports with enthusiasm that he had recently received complete copies of the sample tests, so that they could be duplicated for each child: *"This year I'll be able to get started from the get-go. Right now it's February. I think the test isn't until May, so I have a lot of time to prepare them for it".*

Kathi: Staying in Control

Kathi is a fourth-grade teacher at an elementary school in a medium-sized district in Southwest Washington who has taught every grade from first to fourth in the past twenty years. As an acknowledged teacher leader in her district, Kathi may be characterized as a strong-minded, articulate, and humorous individual who is not at all reluctant to express her views on a number of subjects in education. Teaching is not just a job to Kathi, but is her main interest and passion in life.

Kathi is presently spending a second year with her students, having taught third grade the year before, and "looping" up to fourth grade with the same group. She team teaches with another teacher and their double class contains 63 students in various configurations during the day. Kathi teaches and evaluates language-related studies and history, while her partner teaches mathematics, science, and social studies. Kathi's classroom teaching program is project-based using thematic units and integrations of reading, writing, and social studies. Language arts consists of daily Writers Workshop, one hour of Guided Reading daily, a phonics workbook once or twice per week, and spelling tests geared to phonics and themes.

<u>Responses to State School Reforms</u>

Kathi feels that education has gone from one extreme where everything was textbook-based and teacher driven, to a constructivist extreme where things are so student-driven sometimes that great holes in the curriculum open up. She is taking these two

extremes and saying, "there has to be a balance." For Kathi, teaching is about high expectations. She believes students must be encouraged to take risks and make choices, and to fall "flat on their faces" if they make poor choices. Kathi believes in giving children choice wherever possible; however she prefers to structure the choices herself because she doesn't believe children are developmentally ready for totally free choice.

Control is an important concept for Kathi, who expresses concern about the reform movement in terms of what areas she can control. Classroom observations reveal that Kathi maintains control of the class and directs most of the instructional sequences. She chooses the book to be read, uses a whole class guided reading format, selects the round robin oral readers, asks the literary and skill questions, evaluates the students' answers and provides most of the expertise. Rather than the discussions that Kathi refers to in the interviews, in both observations of her teaching, she utilizes the ubiquitous I-R-E pattern identified by Mehan. Children don't appear to ask questions; only to answer them. However, Kathi sees herself as an interactive teacher. "I've been trying harder as I've gotten older to be a team player. When I was a young teacher, I was not a team player. And it's not that I wanted everyone to do it my way, it's just that if you didn't agree with me that's fine, but I'm still gonna do it my way."

Kathi has an uneasy relationship with higher education. She believes, for example, that teacher training programs don't operate to create good teachers, stating, "I guess my theory of education really is figure out what works and do it." She did approve of her "practical, hands on" Master's program from City University. And yet, while she may be faintly anti-academic, she is definitely not anti-intellectual. She reads widely and participates in a large number of professional development activities.

Kathi has worked on many committees (she calls it "death by committee") that helped form the Essential Learnings and align them with curriculum in her building. She believes the Essential Learnings are good for beginning teachers who may need a "road map" and she likes knowing that she can go to that list to check her own teaching. Still, she

claims to be somewhat cynical about the reform effort because she has seen so many things come and go. She claims she has been sort of sitting back waiting to see if the Essential Learnings are really here to stay before she really changes everything over .

However, Kathi feels that her classroom practice has been positively impacted by the reform efforts in Washington. She now makes her students write every answer in a complete sentence. A lot more time is spent thinking about how things are done. Students not only talk about the answer and the data that they have been working with, but also about how they got the data and what they are thinking in their heads. She believes this has been a beneficial change, but that it is going to take a lot of time to align her curriculum so that she has the time to have those kinds of discussions with the students. She wants to know that in this "great search for accountability" teachers will still be given the freedom to be creative, and will still be given the freedom to take a class of children from where they are to where they can go, without having unreasonable expectations about the level of achievement demanded of them.

She makes up her own mind about the relevance of "reforms." "I don't like change very much. For somebody who has done as many innovative things as I've done in the last twenty years, I really like my rut." is concerned that students she teaches today are not as skillful in reading/language arts as those she taught several years ago. She has returned to the middle, to "balance" because she is concerned that education reform reflects the concern that the community has about education, basically a loss of confidence in public schools.

However, her biggest concern about the reform effort has to do with the area of assessment. She has doubts about whether the state's expectations can be met, and is concerned about being held accountable for something that is not possible to achieve. "I'm really frightened by the new State assessments. I'll be up-front about that. "I don't want to be held accountable for something I can't achieve." Last year she saw the 4th grade teachers and their students terribly frustrated over the test. The children were so frustrated

that they gave up in the middle of the test and Kathi thinks that a lot of work must be done with students as far as teaching them how to take the test--even as young as first and second and third grade. "We're going to be having kids writing down how they're doing what they're doing. And if that's the intent of the State --that we need to have our learners be conscious of their processes -- then great, then that's what we're doing. And that tests that. But if what the state wants to test is their level of literacy, I don't know if it tests that."

Beverly: Propelled Into Continued Excellence by Reform

Beverly is a first grade teacher with eleven years of experience. Seven years in first grade and four years in second grade. She teaches in a rurally located elementary school that serves a predominantly White population. The majority of her students' parents work in the local community or commute to the nearby urban centers. A small percentage of the students in her class (10%-15%) come form fractured or low income families. There are two students with disabilities in her class room who tend to occupy a significant part of her time. Her classroom is neat, decorated and organized into various "stations" which include a core desk area, a listening area, a computer area and two group work areas.

One of her main goals as a teacher is "to expose children to good literature, to foster their curiosity about it and direct their learning of it". Although none of her students entered the class being able to read, by February they could all read the sentence "animals keep themselves clean". Beverly is a strong believer in direct instruction she believes that, "at this level students need to have direct teaching. It is fun to watch them discover on their own but they need tools." She is a confident and highly regarded professional who holds a B.A. and M.Ed. She feels more excited than pressured by the demands posed by the state reform initiatives and feels that they will help her teach in a more focused manner and a bit more directly to "some of the content type ideas " outlined in the state's Essential Academic Learning Requirements. She feels that her motivation to improve instruction comes not from federal or state mandates but rather from her recognition of students' needs for social and academic growth, parent expectations and the goals of her district.

Modifying Practice in the Context of School Reform

Beverly is familiar with the state "Essential Learnings" although she says she can't quote them. She finds the process of clarifying what is essential for students to know to be useful for teachers and the schools. She participated as a team member in the districts efforts to articulate the essential learnings with the first grade curriculum. She believes the essential learning's will be adjusted over time and the good features will be retained. One of her objections to the process of developing the essential learnings is that parents were not involved. She is very pleased with the opportunities to improve her practice that emanated form the effort to reform and restructure teaching in her district. Her interest in instructional improvement is motivated by her professional motivation and integrity. She attributes her involvement in professional development to her personal interest in learning more about how to teach in her first grade classroom. On a scale of 1-10 she places the reform mandates as a 4 1/2 in its level of influence on her interest in improving practice. In particular she identifies herself as the type of teacher that always strives to learn more about how to teach literacy and is gratified by her opportunities to attend workshops in Literacy organized by the district including the workshops offered as part of the Literacy Leadership Team.

She is adamant that her interest in improving practice has not been motivated by a need to meet state or federal mandates. She has "a real problem with top down reform and wants more community participation that is more than a rubber stamp process. She wants real influence by parents and teachers".

In addition she is concerned about the impact that the reform movement will have on "students who make remarkable progress but started behind the rest of her class, like Mary, one of the students with disabilities in her classroom". She feels that these students have been dumped in her classroom and that the district neglected to give her the support that is required for teachers like her who have no expertise in how to integrate them in the classroom. She claims to have been offered immediate and continuing support neither of

which she received. This issue was very impactful for her because she prides herself in her ability to care for her students and she found that she did not have the skills to help her special need students. She felt betrayed and helpless. Only when she went to great pains to document the need for assistance did the district offer assistance but this assistance is very limited. She got an aide for 15 days. She was so upset that she was tempted to write the district and explain that she had a child in her classroom that, "did not have the correct placement. I never felt that frustrated and helpless".

According to Beverly the most significant barriers to school reform are: 1) The inclusion of standards that are too high for students to meet. 2) the addition of benchmarks for Social Studies and Science when first grade teachers should be teaching that basics. 3) Lack of resources including the ability of teachers to plan improvements and get substitutes to allow them to observe each other.

She believes that teachers should be well prepared professional but they don't have time for professional development because they are too busy teaching and planning class activities. The work of teachers is overwhelming and leaves very little time in their lives for any other activities. She appreciates the opportunity to participate in study groups and other professional development activities. The reform movement has made her look at instruction more globally. She recognizes that she has a class of fairly privileged students in part because she teaches a straight first grade class and the parents who assigned students to her class did so to avoid the 1-2 split class which is their other alternative.

Becky

Although Becky received her teaching credentials in 1964 and has had a variety of teaching jobs in four states since, she considers herself to be almost a novice in her current third grade teaching assignment. She taught elementary school music for nine years and has also taught kindergarten, second grade, and a three-four split grade. During her career she has taught in both public and private school, has substituted, and has job-shared a teaching position. She says, "Sometimes, I think a person my age should have it all down

pat and have this neat little order of doing things--but I don't. I feel like a young teacher even though, agewise, I'm not."

She often expresses uncertainty about whether or not she is doing the "right things" in her classroom and checks frequently with others who teach third grade at her school about what she and they are doing. "I guess I feel like I never really have it right so I'm always trying to learn more and trying to incorporate what I learn into my classroom," she says. Yet she prefers workshops and inservice sessions to be practical rather than focused on theory. "I don't like to get bogged down in the theory. When I go to workshops and it's all theory, I don't get as much. I need the hands-on, practical application. To me, the theory part is the least desirable."

Constructing Practice in the Context of School Reform

Becky welcomes the guidelines provided by the reform movement. "They have given us some basic guidelines but there is still a lot of freedom in how we teach and the materials we use. The guidelines for literacy seem to be reasonable," she says. The district is making a real effort to help us know how to assess and how to work with children to meet the guidelines. She mentions study groups on guided reading, spelling, and six-trait writing assessment. I'm always encouraged by meetings that get me re-thinking and re-evaluating and seeing what I can do better. I enjoy inservice!" As a result of the inservice sessions prompted by the reform movement that she has attended, she's trying to do more guided reading instruction. "I like working with small groups--sitting on the floor together so that we can just book-talk. I am incorporating more writing with the reading. The children respond to what they are reading, look for aspects of the story that they can write about, retell, or summarize," she says. "It's having a positive impact on the children's learning."

However, there is much more concern about the assessment piece of the reform movement and her comfort level there is significantly lower. "I think assessment is going to be the biggest challenge, she posits. She hopes that the state will give districts some assessment tools and some materials with which to work in order to attain the goals of

reform. She seems to equate assessment with grading student work. "A lot of grading is very subjective. It's your opinion on how the student is doing. People want to revert back to the old way when you graded on a percentage basis. You had a standardized way of grading. Subjective grading is much more difficult."

She sees a real dilemma in working with children at their developmental level and there being benchmarks or expectations by grade level. "If we believe in developmentally appropriate instruction, then is it okay that some children are not meeting the guidelines at the level were they're supposed to be?" she asks.

However, overall Becky concludes that the reform movement is positive. She says, "They're coming out with a lot of specifics that are going to be pretty had to assess and I worry about getting all the kids working up to that level. I'm glad to have the guidelines. I just wonder how we're going to do it all."

Rebecca: Leading the Charge

Rebecca has taught elementary school for nine years at the P-4 school in a small, rural school district.[1] She has a Master's degree in curriculum and instruction and has taught 3rd grade for the past six years. Rebecca's classroom has a welcoming atmosphere; the door is always open and the room is usually buzzing with activity. It's important to Rebecca that her 23 third graders feel "good about learning." She describes practices such as affirming student attempts, making learning fun and interesting, and enforcing respect. "A lot of that is through dialogue and through honoring each other. I insist on a certain amount of respect...so that there is a feeling of safety."

There is an emphasis on reading and writing in Rebecca's classroom. Posters around the walls describe 'Thoughts for Literature Circles,' 'Writing Topics,' 'Story Elements,' and other related subjects. There is a table called the 'writing center; that has boxes full of writing paper, book paper, crayons, colored pens, and other accouterments.

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[1] There are 457 students in kindergarten through grade four at this school. It is the only elementary school in the district, which has among the lowest per pupil expenditures in the state. The students in Rebecca's class are all of European-American heritage with the exception of one student who is Hispanic

There is a 'Job Board' that guides the block of time that is devoted to reading and writing processes each day.

Rebecca related her emphasis on literacy directly to the state curricular reform policies. Although she is aware that many teachers know little about the state reforms, Rebecca has been a local leader in the movement. She knew as early as 1989 about reform talk, but became actively involved three years ago when she applied and was accepted for the state 'reading cadre,' attending a two week summer workshop with a well-known educational consultant. Since that time, Rebecca has been a member of the Literacy Leadership Team organized through the local Educational Service District (ESD) and a nearby university campus. She has participated in and been an instructor for many workshops offered at the ESD.

Rebecca's practice has changed over the past few years, particularly in the area of reading instruction. She attributes those changes directly to her early involvement with the state reforms, especially the summer course.

> She impacted the way I taught reading incredibly. For example, in my 3rd grade class a lot of my kids were reading and I was under the belief that if I just get them to read more, their reading would just magically improve. Margaret really showed me the continuum of, okay, certainly they've learned reading, but then where do you take them? And it's so hard to make it relevant to all the kids then they're on this incredibly huge range of reading. So she really helped me become more purposeful about what my objective is for every child.

Rebecca is heavily involved in both teaching and taking courses at the ESD, most of which relate in one way or another to the state reform process. Referring to a literacy workshop series that included other elementary teachers, Rebecca commented on the benefits she has experienced through the collaboration, "but I think that I learned as much from them as they learned from me." And in curricular areas in which she feels less confident, Rebecca credits teaching classes and working with other teachers as helping her to deal with reform pressures. "In math, we've just been working on math assessments and so we've done another series and I have just facilitated that - I have not taught it at all. Actually that is an area that I feel weak in, as far as the state requirements and how I can

meet them. But we have received some good materials. We're hoping next year to work with groups of teachers writing our assessments - not just here, but from a number of different schools."

Rebecca believes in the state reform effort. "I believe the standards are great. The benchmarks are great." All of Rebecca's efforts to both learn about and teach about the reform - as well as the evidence of ongoing struggles to actually reform her own practice - are evidence of her support of the reform movement in the state. But, Rebecca is also painfully aware of the difficulties that the broad-based curricular changes hold for elementary school teachers. "I think the reform is wonderful, but perhaps it should be one goal for five years, or at least for elementary. We teach everything. They may say, 'Well, we're not really testing on science yet, but they will be in two years!"

Another concern related to the pace of the change is the pressure that the accountability measures are placing on the system. Rebecca commented, "I have a problem with how quickly they're expecting them to be implemented and the testing being done before teachers have time to change their practice." Later, she talked about the fear that the 4th grade teachers have felt regarding the state performance assessments.

> I think the 4th grade is more concerned. At one point they were talking about publishing the names of the teachers of the kids who were taking the test, and I know the 4th grade teachers were really upset, because the test doesn't reflect what the child knows in that classroom. The test reflects what they know for the past 8 or 9 years of their life. Not just in school, but everything. To even put it on four people's back is a little tough. I guess I'm just hoping that doesn't come.

Cross-Case Analysis

After the individual cases were written and shared, the project moved to looking across cases for similarities and differences. When we closely examined the individual cases, several themes emerged which appeared to cross all, or in some cases most, of the case studies. Five themes seemed particularly pertinent to the study, because they directly addressed our initial research questions.

Theme 1: All five teachers support the essence of reform with the standards serving as guidelines. Further, teachers interpreted the reforms to fit their own belief/practices systems.

Tom, a novice teacher, embraces educational reform as expressed by the Washington State Essential Academic Learning Requirements or EALRs by "speaking often" on the value of EALRs and other reform standards as a "guideline" for teaching. His enthusiastic compliance with all the assumptions underlying the reform initiatives speaks to Tom's "philosophy" of teaching--stated as "making *lessons* interesting and meaningful for students"--and to the context in which he begins his career in a relatively homogeneous rural district where "alignment" is seen as a valued goal.

Kathi agrees that the EALRs provide a roadmap for beginning teachers, but values them less for her own practice. In contrast to Tom, Kathi is a veteran teacher who has seen other reform movements in education come and go. Kathi approves of the EALRs because they bring a "balance" back into education, and will be useful in restoring public confidence in schools. As a teacher who maintains control and expertise, Kathi envisions the reform as a validation (checklist) of what she already knows and does; she resists change, but can be persuaded to change if she is eventually convinced that such change is warranted. She reads, observes, and reflects on issues before she forms her own opinions and adapts the change to her own style.

Beverly feels excited by the new demands of the reform initiative, finding that "the process of clarifying what is essential for students to know" impels her to look at instruction more globally. In contrast, Becky seeks validation of her teaching, confirmation that she is "doing the right thing" in the reform initiative. Rebecca is a leader in the movement, relating her emphasis on literacy directly to the state curricular reforms, and stating that the standards and the benchmarks are "great."

Theme 2: The Washington State educational reforms have impacted teachers' practice, but practice has lagged behind knowledge/level of awareness, as is developmentally appropriate.

Rebecca, a member of the Literacy Leadership Team, attributes recent changes in her practice to her participation in the reform initiatives. Her literacy instruction, in particular, changed first because of the professional development opportunities which came her way (Margaret Mooney's work being particularly influential), and second, because of her own role in collaborating to provide professional development to others. She admits to feeling less confident in other curricular areas such as mathematics, but works to inform herself and change her practice by participating on committees and in professional development work in that content area. As might be expected, Rebecca's practice evidenced the reform initiatives most deeply.

Others were frank about the need for change in their practice to align with the reform initiative. Tom stated, "I haven't changed what I'm doing...but I'm thinking about it....I'm making connections." Limited observations of Tom's teaching revealed that he was utilizing the test packets as the basis for his classroom instruction. Kathi, while waiting to see if the reform will last, talks about making a few changes which "positively impact" her practice. One example she talked about involved having her students think about how things are done rather than just provide answers. Our limited observations of Kathi's practice did not substantiate this change. Beverly's advocacy of "direct instruction" was confirmed by observations in her classroom and she remains at the awareness level with regard to changes in her practice, and she is resistant to the idea of including other content areas to her first grade curriculum. Becky sees the guidelines for literacy to be "reasonable" and mentions utilizing more guided reading in her class; however, observations revealed that she still utilized a "round robin" approach with the small groups.

While the teachers' practice clearly lagged behind their knowledge/awareness level with regard to classroom changes, the research team views this as developmentally

appropriate. In keeping with what is known about the change process, the individual responds to new ideas with differing levels of awareness based upon his or her own belief system. First, the learner must conceptualize the new learning over time and this is facilitated by talking about it. At some point the learner may try out new practices which will approximate the desired behaviors. As mentioned before, sustained professional development efforts appear to support this change process. Clearly, the teachers needed to "talk the talk" before "walking the talk."

Theme 3: All five teachers worried about the assessment/accountability component of the reform. They were concerned for their students and for themselves.

Unsurprisingly, the teacher who appeared to be least concerned with the new Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) was Rebecca, but even she is aware of the "pressures" the time frame for implementation is putting on teachers. She is most concerned about fourth-grade teachers, who will be first to administer the test and for the students whose academic history will be assessed. The prospect of having test scores published in the newspaper seems very intimidating to Rebecca.

Tom's worry about the test is expressed more obliquely: "This year I'll be able to get started from the get-go. Right now it's February. I think the test isn't until May, so I have a lot of time to prepare for it." In fact, Tom's curriculum became the test.

Kathi's "biggest concern" is with assessment. She watched the piloting of the fourth-grade test the preceding year and saw teachers and their students terribly frustrated over the test. She's afraid that the expectations are unreasonable, suspicious of the "great search for accountability," and frightened by the high stakes nature of the test. She also maintains that the test doesn't measure students' level of literacy.

Becky is concerned for students who will not meet the standards required of them by the WASL, particularly special needs students. She strongly feels that the standards have been set too high, and that first grade teachers should not be responsible for teaching content areas like social studies and science, but should concentrate on "the basics."

Theme 4: All of the teachers but Tom were resistant to topdown reform to some degree. This resistance was more personal and reactive than analytics and systemic.

Examples of the resistance are situationally specific. For example, the novice teacher, Tom, is fully engaged in learning his profession and therefore totally enthusiastic about the reform initiative. With no prior practice to unlearn, the reform movement is, for Tom, simply the ways things are done.

Rebecca has a great personal and professional stake in the success of the reform initiative, yet she is painfully aware of the pressures that teachers experience regarding the assessments. Her resistance takes the form of concern about the accountability constraints imposed by the WASL, and the timeframe imposed from above by the state. Rebecca's resistance seems rooted in her participation--the collaborative nature of which is highly valued by her. She feels that teachers should have a voice in the decisions about implementation rather than being told when they would accomplish it.

Kathi wants to be in control. When reforms are imposed from above, Kathi's reaction is to resist and to do things "her way." She determines what she will adopt into her practice. She fears and resents the intrusion of the WASL onto her "turf."

Beverly is adamant that the impetus for change in her practice comes from her professional motivation and integrity--the recognition of students' needs for social and academic growth, parent expectations, and the goals of her district--rather than from federal or state mandates. Beverly's objections to the EALRs is rooted in her belief that real teacher and parent participation was excluded. Beverly also feels overwhelmed and frustrated by the imposed standards.

Becky is also resentful of and overwhelmed by the unreasonable amount that she is expected to accomplish. She sees a real dilemma in the reform initiative based on her belief in developmental curriculum and the conflict between the individual needs of students, and the benchmarks they are expected to meet.

Unsurprisingly, the resistance of the each teacher is focused upon his or her specific context and does not reflect any generalized or system resistance to the reform initiative. Rather, the resistance seems to emanate from a very personal fear of the consequences of the reform. None seems to question or critique the underlying assumptions (the legitimacy) of that reform.

Theme 5: All teachers valued a learner-centered professional development process, which included features such as choice, sustained collaboration, active participation and a contextual relevance to their teaching.

Each teacher in the case study was a participant in the yearlong professional development series known as the Year of the Reader Workshops which were planned and presented by the Literacy Leadership Team. The series was wildly successful with regard to the evaluations of the participants. Rebecca, one of the LLT, was a planner and presenter at the workshops, held on four days over the academic year, and followed up by voluntary study groups. The case studies presented evidence that teachers valued this series primarily because it embodied what they wanted in this regard.

Every teacher in the case study desired to improve their practice, and valued professional development in the service of that goal. Because teachers tend to be eclectic in their practice, they expressed the desire for "practical" professional development in which they could be active participants. In particular, Kathi and Becky mentioned the need for "hands on" participation in workshops.

Sustained collaboration was mentioned most strongly by Rebecca.

Tom [NEED SOME MORE FROM THIS CASE STUDY THAT'S PRESENTLY NOT INCLUDED]

Beverly stresses her internal motivation for improving her practice, and expresses most clearly her gratification at the opportunity to attend workshops in literacy organized by the Leadership in Literacy Team. She is also most vocal about meeting the needs of students, in particular, her special needs students.

Thus issues of choice, sustained collaboration, active participation, and contextual relevance in professional development emerged very strongly from the case studies.

Social Context Issues

Teachers did not raise questions regarding the assumptions underlying the reform initiative. This is a problem because of the many factors affecting the well-being of the students and the school as an institution are not even under discussion. Factors that affect the well-being of kids in school are not part of the discussion (either social/economic issues or school organization/resource use issues).

Class, ethnicity, language, mobility, racism, cultural capital issues. Question: did these issues not arise here because of (1) what we asked or (2) where we asked it.

Teachers are worried about whether kids will fit in or not fit into the assessment process (groups of kids), but they are not questioning whether they SHOULD fit in.

Through standardization of the curriculum and of professional development, the teacher becomes less responsive to the individual needs of the learners, as districts become less responsive to the diversity of needs of teachers. As institutions come increasingly under fire, there is an impetus to centralize and standardize. There is an attempt to enforce through coercion what used to be achieved through consensus.

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